

Notions of Health and Hygiene in the Great-Depression Era

United States: Apex, Arizona

Madeleine Levesque,
Arizona State University

Abstract: The United States' views on health and hygiene have been developing for centuries, undergoing several major changes. At the turn of the 19th century and into the early-mid 1900s, new fields of health sciences emerged and beauty standards evolved, impacting American consumption of toiletry items. This culture of cleanliness was very pervasive as shifting notions of health, hygiene, and appearance reached the laborers and occupants of the Depression-era Saginaw and Manistee logging camp of Apex, Arizona, despite being largely isolated from major towns and cities. Based on the artifacts found on site in Apex, it is apparent that residents bought into emerging and popular ideas of health and hygiene, such as the unacceptability of body odor, irregular bowel movements, and unkempt appearances.

Digestive Health

- Gastroenterology grew as a field during the 1930s and 1940s
- A major theme in gastroenterology included ‘curing’ various afflictions via purgation using laxatives. Constipation was seen as an ‘American’ disease that reflected sedentism, laziness, and an over-processed, over-indulgent diet (Whorton 1993).
- Advertising posited that constipation and built-up fecal matter would poison the bloodstream and lead to body odor (Whorton 1993).
- It appears that residents of Apex bought into these ideas, as there were numerous laxative bottles found on-site, including Dr. W.B. Caldwell’s Pepsin Syrup, Charles H. Fletcher’s Castoria Oil (top left), and magnesium citrate/milk of magnesia.
- The presence of multiple kinds of laxatives imply that people had their ‘laxative of choice’ that was not being provided by the company store.

Body Odor

- By the Great Depression, body odor was generally accepted as unhygienic. Products like mouthwash, flavored toothpaste, and deodorant were marketed en masse.
- Germ theory connected bacterial growth to poor hygiene to body odor.
- By the 1920s, “halitosis,” or bad breath, was invented by the creator of Listerine as a medical condition, and the cure, mouthwash, was marketed incredibly successfully (Clark 2015). Lavis and Listerine mouthwash bottles as well as Pepsodent toothpaste (1915 packaging pictured top right) were found on-site, both mint- flavored.
- Two milk glass containers of MUM antiperspirant deodorant (bottom right) were found on-site. This deodorant was marketed towards women for armpits and genitals, as women’s body odor was especially unseemly.
- Even though routine bathing would have been rare at Apex due to lack of running water or showers, it appears people were still conscious of their body odor.

Feminine Hygiene

- Chloride of Lime lids, Old Dutch Cleanser cans, and multiple Clorox bottles were found at Apex, which were likely used as disinfectants for community hygiene purposes for deodorizing and sanitizing communal privies and kitchens.
- A separate shard from a smaller bottle of Lysol was found (bottom right), indicating it had a purpose apart from cleaning/community hygiene.
- Throughout the 20th century, Lysol concentrate was marketed towards women as a feminine hygiene product/odor-eliminating vaginal douche (Eveleth 2013; ad at left from Foose 2019).
- The shard found on-site has a logo similar to the cursive label/watermark found on whole bottles in advertisements marketing lysol as a feminine douche. The glass bottle pictured right is a full-sized version of a Lysol bottle found on Ebay whose watermark appears to be placed on the shoulder, which is where the shard appears to come from as well.

Concluding Ideas

- By the time Apex was occupied, the association between health/hygiene and bacteria, body odors, and presentability had been established in mainstream American culture. Based on the artifacts, occupants of Apex bought into these ideas, and seemed to follow and keep up with expectations of cleanliness.
- The fear of smelling bad, and the idea that the body’s natural tendency is towards decay, bacteria, etc. was an effective marketing strategy for laxatives, toothpaste and mouthwash.
- Despite the site being rural and isolated from major cities, and the fact that many laborers were Swedish immigrants, these emergent American trends of health and hygiene were so compelling that they kept up with them.

That *Other You* Could
Wreck Your Marriage!



Your married happiness depends on the real you . . .
confident you, never doubting your intimate feminine
hygiene. Don't risk becoming another you!

As . . . douche regularly with "Lysol!"
"Lysol" cleanses the vaginal canal even
in the presence of mucous matter. No
makeup! Like soap, salt or soda can
possibly act the same way!
"Lysol" is the famous disinfectant with
staining, proved power to kill germs
quickly on contact!
Yet, gentle, non-caustic "Lysol" will
not harm delicate tissue. Correct douching
solution in the simple directions on every
bottle. Many doctors advise patients to
douch regularly with "Lysol" just to
insure chastity alone, and to use it as
often as needed. No gray aftereffect.
Don't run this risk! Don't let neglect
create a "dual personality" . . . another you,
full of doubts, misgivings and inhibitions!
(Don't let that other you destroy your love!)
Get "Lysol" brand disinfectant today,
and use it regularly.

Preferred **361** over any
other liquid preparation for
Feminine Hygiene!
"Lysol"
A Concentrated Germ-Killer



Hair Removal

- Body hair removal was popularized for women in the 1920s with the era of flapper attire, where legs and armpits were exposed by short, sleeveless dresses (Smithsonian Institution n.d.; ad at left from Morrison 2022).
- Men’s facial hair removal was already considered basic hygiene by the early 1900s due to the trapping of lice, oil, dirt, odor, sweat, and bacteria in beards and moustaches (Smithsonian Institution n.d.).
- A Gem “butterfly” style safety razor, patented in 1904, was found on-site (left) which could be used to shave at home; straight razors were commonly used in barbershops (National Museum of American History n.d. b.).
- The shift from facial hair removal being a service to accessible at home reflects the expectation that facial hair upkeep be part of basic hygiene routines.
- Other relevant artifacts found on-site include a shaving mug, a Lifebuoy shaving cream tube cap, and a Valet safety razor blade.

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